

# **Feminist responses to sexual harassment in academia: Voice, solidarity and resistance through online activism**

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## **Abstract**

This paper takes as its starting point the compilation and circulation online of a list naming alleged sexual harassers in Indian academia in order to examine broader questions about the nature of online activism to address gender based violence. Set against the historical silencing of women who speak about violence as well as institutional mechanisms to address this issue through due process, we examine the meaning, impact and limitations of this list, which generated considerable discord and debate within feminists in India. In doing so, we consider the place of these new forms of collective actions and expressions of solidarity within the broader feminist campaigns to resist violence.

**Keywords: #MeToo; Online activism; feminist social movements; sexual violence**

## **Key messages:**

- This paper offers reflections on the role of online feminist activism against sexual violence;
- It explores the limits of institutional mechanisms in responding to sexual violence in the academe;
- It considers the challenges and possibilities of alternative forms of feminist activism to prevailing responses to gender-based violence.

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## Introduction

In 2019, a moment of unprecedented public attention to sexual harassment and violence is underway, generated by the recent and widespread breaking of silence by victims/survivors, and their advocates, explicitly naming the harms they have experienced. The silence that has surrounded gender based violence (GBV) is being shattered in several institutions including the film and entertainment industry, in the political arena, and universities. In these environments, victims/survivors are speaking out, through mainstream and social media and, most remarkably, have captured wider public attention so that it seems they are *being listened to*. One of the many ways in which the silence has been shattered is by the publication of lists of (alleged) perpetrators of GBV. The 21st century version of whisper networks (Jeong, 2018), and of messages scrawled in women's toilet cubicles (Ryan, 2014), these social media-based lists are rapidly circulated, gathering a huge audience and generating commentary from a wide variety of sources. While criticism and backlash from conservative groups are to be expected, these actions have also been criticized as much as they are championed by those identifying as feminists.

This paper explores the ways in which one such list, compiled by Indian graduate student Raya Sarkar (Kappal, 2017), naming 72 academics at universities in India, raised important questions about voice, solidarity and resistance in the struggle against GBV. We consider the following questions: What does an act of survivor solidarity such as publishing a list of predatory men mean, and what work does it do? To what extent and in what ways can these campaigns be considered a legitimate part of collective campaigns of resistance to GBV? In this paper we address these questions by drawing on events in India, the UK and the US, beginning with an account of Raya

Sarkar's list and some of the debates generated by it among feminists in India. Next, we consider the history of silencing women and how acts of resistant unsilencing may have transformative potential, and the gains and losses for survivors of sexual violence deciding to break the silence. This history of (un)silencing, a direct response to institutional failings to address GBV, enables us to understand the meaning of Sarkar's list and the context that necessitated it. We examine the meaning and implications of these acts, locate them within the context of the history of collective responses to sexual harassment, and explore the new possibilities and challenges that such acts represent for feminist social movements.

### **Sarkar's list and the Aftermath**

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017, an Indian feminist and law student at the US-based University of California Davis, Raya Sarkar, put out a call in a Facebook post asking fellow students to share their experiences with academics "who have sexually harassed/were sexually predatory to them" (Kappal, 2017). Sarkar's call came in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein saga and the #MeToo movement in the West<sup>1</sup> (Kantor & Toohey, 2017; Langone, 2018). Sarkar's list generated more than 300 responses from those who came forward to tell their stories and name their abusers. Starting off with just two names, the list quickly grew to 72 male academics at Indian universities, many of them prominent figures in liberal and progressive circles (Kappal, 2017). The list did not contain any detail about particular incidents and did not reveal the names of the accusers in order to protect their identity but contained a list of the alleged perpetrators of sexual harassment and the names of their institutions. Comments on social media in response to the list suggested that to many women in Indian academia, the list served as confirmation of the widely circulated off-line whispers or resonated with their own experiences.

Sarkar's list, which has since come to be known as LoSHA (List of Sexual Harassers in Academia) resulted in a very public splintering of Indian feminist communities after a group of prominent feminists published their concerns in an open letter on the progressive blog Kafila (Menon, 2017).

The letter stated:

It worries us that anybody can be named anonymously, with lack of answerability....

Where there are genuine complaints, there are institutions and procedures, which we should utilize. [...] We too know the process is harsh and often tilted against the complainant. We remain committed to strengthening these processes. At the same time, abiding by the principles of natural justice, we remain committed to due process, which is fair and just. This manner of naming can delegitimize the long struggle against sexual harassment, and make our task as feminists more difficult.

The authors of the letter urged the list be withdrawn, promising that victims/survivors who wished to make complaints through due process would be supported by the "larger feminist community" (Menon, 2017).

Publication of the list and the subsequent debates about it revealed the intersectional divisions within feminism in India and raised important questions about legitimate responses to sexual violence in Indian universities, which mirror debates in other countries. What work does the publication of such a list do in the movement against GBV? Does such internet activism have the potential to transform societal attitudes to GBV? Does such a list bypass and thereby undermine feminist efforts to seek justice for victims'/survivors' through institutional mechanisms? This divide between Indian feminists was initially articulated as a difference based on age and caste<sup>2</sup> as between older, established, metropolitan *savarna* (upper caste) feminists who criticised the list and younger *dalit* (lower-caste) feminists who defended it. However, we argue that these debates can

be better characterised as disagreements about strategies of resistance to GBV and the relative merits of speaking out through institutional mechanisms or through online lists. This debate is taking place in a context where women—often those who are ill-served by institutional mechanisms due to their marginalised location at the intersection of caste- and age-based disadvantages—are rejecting the choice between legal-formal mechanisms for justice and remaining silent about particular experiences of victimisation and are instead seeking alternate means of speaking out through internet activism.

### **Internet activism and sexual violence: The context**

Observing the current state of online organizing around sexual violence, we can discern three specific forms of internet activism that represent the burgeoning movements taking shape: the emergence of survivor-focused Twitter hashtags; the proliferation of survivor narratives published on high-traffic news source sites; and the visibility of non-governmental, survivor-led online organizations focusing on anti-GBV policy and accountability.

Twitter has been a potent platform for survivor visibility, where the ubiquity of hashtags such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and the defensive rejoinder #NotAllMen, signals the increasing presence of survivors and allies. Perhaps the most visible Twitter-based survivor campaign, #MeToo, was initiated by Tarana Burke more than a decade ago though the allegations they raise go back decades and were for most part disregarded by mainstream media. Burke intended to draw attention to the plight of Women of Color whose experiences with sexual violence are often erased in mainstream media (Guerra, 2017). Specific to feminist activism in India, the 2012 gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey in Delhi unleashed a torrent of internet activism-fueled rage

across and beyond the country, with thousands commenting on the #delhirapecase and #nirbhaya, broadcasting opportunities to join in protest (Losh, 2014). It has been argued that hashtag activism provides opportunities for survivors to seek solidarity and empowerment, and re-centers survivors' experiences, countering erasure (Dixon, 2014).

Additionally, the proliferation of survivor narratives published on high-traffic online news sources including *BuzzFeed*, *Huffington Post*, and the *New York Times* suggests a new wave of openness to amplifying the previously unmentionable. Among the most visible: the victim witness statement of a survivor of rape perpetrated against her by a Stanford University student, Brock Turner, behind a trash dumpster (Baker, 2016) and Tarana Burke's own story that prompted her to initiate the #MeToo movement (Guerra, 2017). These narratives are as individual as the survivors themselves, yet collectively, they bring to the surface the seemingly intractable obstacles to obtaining justice for survivors: the persistent shaming, the insurmountably cumbersome and inaccessible judicial processes.

Finally, survivors have mobilized to transform policy and practices through connecting with non-profit collectives online such as the US-based KnowYourIX (2019) and British-based EndRapeOnCampus (2019). In India, several movements, including the 2011 Why Loiter project on women's right to public spaces, the 2015 PinjraTod (Break the Cage) movement against sexist curfew rules in student halls represent the many ways that Indian feminists have spoken up in online and offline spaces against sexist violence and sexist policies (Sharma, 2019). These organizations seek not only to promote survivor visibility and solidarity, but to act decisively upon federal, local, and institutional policies, primarily through public pressure and strategies aimed at revealing and critiquing unjust applications of laws, such as Title IX<sup>3</sup> (Bolger, 2013). The fact that

these organizations advance strategies primarily through the internet has ensured they are much larger, more trans-national, and ultimately more impactful than grassroots groups operating in one geographical locale (Heldman, Ackerman and Breckenridge-Jackson, 2018).

There are though, limitations to online activism. While public exposure of GBV is, in itself, a vital step to transform cultures that ignore or endorse it, public discourse alone will not bring an end to GBV. Online activism can have potent outcomes for anti-GBV activists including a greater sense of purpose and co-ordination, an opportunity to enact strategies that have concrete outcomes, and connecting with others who share a commitment to intersectional feminist practice (Linder, Myers, Riggle, & Lacy, 2016). However, it is perhaps best considered as opening a door to further work which is essential to ensure lasting transformation not only in cultural and discursive, but also in material aspects of life. One of the important contributions made by internet activism is to breaking the silence surrounding GBV, as we discuss below.

### **The Gendering of Silence and Voice**

There is a long ignominious social, political, cultural and legal history of silencing, doubting, invalidation and vilification of women and girls who speak out about violence (Salter, 2012). A recent high-profile example is the treatment of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford who disclosed sexual violence by Brett Kavanaugh while he was at university. She was vilified not only by mass online attacks and by some media sources, but also by the President of the United States who mocked her testimony (Garber, 2018). These acts of silencing both reflect and maintain structures of power.

Women are silenced not only when they speak about men's violence but when they are deemed to be 'out of place' in other contexts. Mary Beard, a British scholar and classicist with a high public profile due, in part, to the online abuse directed at her, draws on the classics to demonstrate that the "first recorded example of a man telling a woman to 'shut up' ...[is] immortalised at the start of the Odyssey." This, she says, is a nice demonstration that right where written evidence for Western culture starts, women's voices are not being heard in the public sphere; more than that, as Homer has it, an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species. (Beard, 2015. p. 810)

Alongside this history of silencing in the offline world, the online world is now awash with abusive ways of telling women to 'shut up', especially, but not only, when they speak out about men's violence. These directives are often mixed with accusations that women are 'stupid' or 'ignorant', and with violent, graphic, threatening, sexualised details of how women will be silenced (see Jane, 2017; Lewis et al., forthcoming).

In resistance to this silencing, women activists have positioned 'speaking out' as central to the struggle against men's violence. Serisier notes that "the transformative political potential of experiential storytelling" has a "foundational role": "feminist anti-rape politics is founded on the belief that producing and disseminating a genre of personal experiential narratives can end sexual violence" (2018, p.4). However, speaking out alone has only partial effect; it is *being heard* that has the potentially transformative effect. Practices of "collective listening" (Serisier, 2018, p.6) are essential if "the cycle of speech, silence and forgetting" (p.194) is to be broken. Serisier goes on to analyse how some accounts of rape are heard and others are silenced, through what Lyotard describes as a *différance*, "a social process of silencing that refuses the victim of a wrong a



legitimate speaking position” (Serisier, 2018, p.7). It is this process that has resulted in accounts of violent rapes by strangers, by Black men, and against white women, to circulate and be heard and believed in contrast to the experiences of Black women and of sexual violence by known men. There is a politics, then, not only to speaking out, but also to listening. In the current upsurge in public conversations about GBV, there is a risk that patterns of selective listening are repeated; a lot of air-time is given to GBV perpetrated by elite men in positions of power over women in comparatively elite circles, overshadowing Black and minority ethnic women’s experiences.

Feminist politics is not alone in negotiating contemporary efforts to voice resistance; speaking out against men’s violence has gone beyond the boundaries of feminism to a much wider public. In these contemporary efforts to voice resistance—Sarkar’s list, the #MeToo and #HimToo initiatives, among others—women’s voices are amplified and being listened to in both social and mainstream news media, a long-overdue level of attention that is astonishing to activists like us who have borne witness to decades of attempts to bring attention to men’s violence against women. This new-found attention to women’s voices serves to drive these issues into the public and political sphere, making it harder for decision-makers to dismiss or disregard them. For example, in response to intersecting racism and sexism which has rendered invisible the numerous Black women killed by American police, the #SayHerName campaign has used voice—literal and figurative—to highlight the harm done to them (Khaleeli, 2018). Former college students, mobilized by experiences with institutional betrayal after reporting their experiences of rapes, have formed powerful international organizations with visibility and impact (Helman, Ackerman, and Breckenridge-Jackson, 2018).

Just as they have throughout history, contemporary efforts to speak out are once again met with attempts to undermine and re-silence. Such commentaries come from across the spectrum of gender (and other) politics. For example, film director Roman Polanski, who was recently expelled from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in light of sexual assault cases against him, dismissed the #MeToo movement as ‘mass hysteria’ (Desta, 2018). Brendan O’Neill, editor of Spiked, an internet magazine whose roots lie in Marxism but whose current perspective is more libertarian, condemns “the prudish purging of political life” as a “sexual Inquisition” based on “fact-lite dross” (O’Neill, 2017). Some of these accounts are rooted in the idea that “women are now on top” (Moore, 2017) or, at least, that a kind of post-feminist equality has been achieved, and draw on ideas of alleged perpetrators as hapless victims of hysterical mob justice and extra-judicial vigilantism. Responses such as these have been well-rehearsed by those seeking to protect male privilege but have also been articulated by those who broadly support the campaign for justice for victims of men’s violence but who now express concern that the campaign has ‘gone too far’ (Foroohar, 2017).

What was surprising was the criticism from feminists who expressed their concern that these emergent forms of redress and activism could displace or undermine long-standing efforts to bolster institutional mechanisms of redress. In this context, some feminists have been critical of LoSHA for naming alleged perpetrators without any accountability; commenting on Sarkar’s list, Bhattacharya & Ramdev (2017) caution that “[n]aming offenders would have been easy vengeance in these cases, but never a guarantor of any attainable trace of justice”. One of the feminist and Left activist signatories of the Kafil letter, Kavita Krishnan (2017), expressed concern that “although vigilantism may feel satisfying, it has grave consequences for feminist politics” and noted that improving due processes is the only reasonable course open to campaigners.

We draw upon Lessard's (2011) use of the term "inversion" to explore the nature this concern by very disparate groups for those named by LoSHA. Lessard utilises this term to understand "the application of concepts and images of powerlessness and discrimination to describe the situation of relatively powerful persons, social groups, and institutions" (p.182) while victims and their advocates are "portrayed as powerful forces able to capture and corrupt not only university policy discourses but also legal discourses" (p. 188). We can see references to vigilante justice (Dhillon, 2017) and mob justice (Krishnan (2017) as a similar "symbolic reversal" (Lessard, 2011, p.188), which takes little account of the structural realities whereby it is the powerless who are naming the powerful in a context where there is little prospect of real damage to the latter through these disclosures. Moreover, depicting women as vengeful individualises their actions and denies the collective nature of such campaigns to render sexual violence visible.

Paradoxically, when women expose or challenge the men who do them harm, they are subjected to further harm through abusive messages and threats of physical and sexual violence. For example, Raya Sarkar received death and rape threats after posting their list (FirstPost, 2017), and women who have made allegations of sexual violence by well-known people such as national sportsmen, have been subjected to campaigns of online hatred and threats which also expose their identity (Pelling, 2016). As well as harming the individual women targeted for such abuse, these actions also have exclusionary intent, acting as a warning to other women of the price they would pay if they too chose to speak out (Lewis et al, 2019).

Against this history of silencing, actions such as Raya Sarkar's initiative inarguably opened the door for dozens of women to end their silence around experiences of sexual harassment and assault by male academics. Silencing is a typical experience of women after experiencing sexual violence

as survivors grapple with the enormity of being dehumanized through an act of violence (Moor, Ben-Meir, Golan-Shapira, & Farchi, 2013) and through subsequent societally-imposed shame, relentlessly delivered by narratives that blame women and impugn their characters (Aherns, 2006; Ryan, 2011). Silence is likewise upheld by the malignant representation of women who speak up as vengeful, seeking retribution for a supposedly imagined harm.

Sarkar's list revealed the pervasive nature of sexual harassment in academe in India and drew attention to the misogynist cultures that prevail in universities across the world. Can such silence-breaking serve as a remedy to the occurrence of violence or does it undermine existing institutional remedies?

### **Seeking Redress in the Context of Institutional Betrayal**

One of the most powerful and valid critiques of the LoSHA list was its reliance on 'naming and shaming' alleged perpetrators of sexual harassment, who had no means to counter allegations against them, and no way of clearing their name by evaluating the evidence against them through a due process established in law or through institutional mechanisms. There is indeed the possibility that the intersecting disadvantages that render formal mechanisms beyond the reach of most women may well work to disadvantage particular categories of men from subordinate castes and religious minorities accused through such lists.

The very existence of formal-legal mechanisms contains within it the capacity to change social norms as well as to secure justice for (some) individual victims/survivors (alongside ensuring mechanisms of establishing their innocence for alleged perpetrators) and thereby signal the public

nature of this violence and state responsibility to counter it. However, feminist scholars have long been critical of criminal justice solutions to the problem of GBV and have drawn attention to the many ways in which legal institutions, processes, and conceptualisations of the legal subject are deeply gendered and patriarchal (for example, Kapur, 2015; Walklate et al, 2017) and have pointed out the gains and losses, and the problems and possibilities incurred by a strategy which relies on such institutions to provide justice (Lewis, 2004; Walklate 2008). Feminist campaigning and activism has succeeded in bringing about the criminalisation of behaviour that was not so long ago considered acceptable. However, people of minoritized genders and sexual orientations continue to choose not to engage with these mechanisms, and reporting rates of GBV committed against them remain low (Cantor, et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2003). This can be explained by the notion of ‘institutional betrayal’ (Platt et al, 2009) whereby those who speak out about their victimisation are let down by the institutions from which they see redress. The wide chasm between the law in theory and in practice raises questions relating to the appropriateness or, at the very least, the limits of devoting feminist energy to institutional and criminal justice investigatory and punitive mechanisms.

Formal complaints and anonymous lists are thus two forms of redress at the opposite end of the risk spectrum for survivors. Initiatives such as LoSHA and off-line whisper networks seek outcomes that are not about accountability and compensation for wrongs—though the LoSHA did result in individual complaints against some of those named on the list (Kumar, 2018; The Wire, 2018). The list, instead, was geared towards cultural transformation through reiterating the commonality of women’s experiences of violence, as an expression of solidarity and as an act of unsilencing. In doing so, it accomplished three specific goals that university adjudication processes currently do not: 1) It provided publicly accessible information about who perpetrators are (or may

be) to other students for their own safety planning, 2) it reversed the shame that has historically been attached to victims/survivors of sexual violence by shifting the focus from the victims to (alleged) perpetrators of violence, and 3) it required a far less intensive investment of time and energy from survivors than engaging in cumbersome, often re-traumatizing adjudication processes that commonly fail to center survivors' safety and dignity.

Regarding the first effect, the original motivation expressed by Sarkar—"to make my friends and their friends aware of and wary of different sexual predators [...] to make students safe" (Cassin & Prasad, 2017)—was to send up a well-intentioned warning flare to provide students with information about risk, so that they could make informed decisions as far as they are able to. Though critics tried to cast the list as a vengeful attempt to publicly shame men without due process, Sarkar was arguing that the list functioned as a shield, not a weapon. Acknowledging the failure of due process in practice, Sarkar went on to explain, "in my opinion, knowing how college administrations function, harassers will continue to hold their positions of power" (Shankar, 2017). Even when such processes work to hold perpetrators accountable, information about the outcomes of institutional mechanisms is rarely made public through non-disclosure agreements (Batty, 2019), denying others access to important information for reducing their own risk. The second significant feature of Sarkar's list is that it explicitly shifted the focus back onto perpetrators. Thirdly, the list allowed survivors to take action to name their perpetrators in a way that centered their own safety, and reduced the likelihood of secondary victimization that arises from pursuing formal adjudication.

Sarkar's decision to create the list and make it public thus reflected the reality of hierarchies that function in contemporary academe, in India and elsewhere (Cole & Hassel, 2017). Institutions

have shown reluctance to take action against those reported to be abusive, as seen in the inaction by Jawaharlal Nehru University against Professor Atul Johri despite days of student protests regarding non-action by university authorities in the face of allegations of sexual harassment against him by several students (Singh, 2018). Students, especially graduate students, can rarely be assured that they have protection from further harm, should they make their abuse known. Doing so is likely to mean they relinquish their professional networks, the ways they are perceived by others, and ultimately, their futures (Whitley & Page, 2015). Adjudication procedures offered by individual institutions invariably put the onus on survivors, requiring them to reveal details of personal experiences of trauma for scrutiny and deliberation by more powerful, and often much older, others. As Sarkar bemoaned, “It is shocking how most victims do not wish to file complaints fearing that they will be bullied, silenced and made a pariah by their academic communities” (Shankar, 2017). While data regarding the outcomes of such processes in India are not available, data related to such processes in the U.S. suggest that statistically, only in very few of these cases are perpetrators held accountable (Ziering & Dick, 2015). Institutional betrayal is much more pronounced for categories of women whose agency in the academy has been repeatedly negated on account of the intersecting axes of discrimination and disadvantage based on race, gender, and class (Turner, 2002) and, in the Indian context, caste (Pujari, 2017). By creating an easily accessible list and inviting any student with experiences of abuse to contribute to it, Sarkar enacted a far less time and energy intensive way for students to use their voices. Such a response can arguably enable survivors to return their focus more promptly to their academic goals and progress, which researchers suggest are often hampered by experiences with sexual trauma, exacerbated by drawn out procedures of formal inquiry and redress (Jordan, Combs, and Smith, 2014).

Sarkar's list points to the efficacy of unsilencing in opening up cultures of sexism to scrutiny, particularly where more than one name emerges from a particular institution. A coordinated chorus of survivor voices may spur institutional accountability in the ways that individual cases of survival do not. A productive tension that emerges from such unsilencing is that it foregrounds the collective nature of change, summoned through the corporeality of individually harmed actors. Lorde (1977) noted that "in the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation, and to recognize her role as vital" (p. 83). In this appraisal, each individual voice matters, as does the centrifugal force of Sarkar's listmaking. The women who participated in the list tacitly signaled their trust in the power of unsilencing to effect change; Sarkar's decision to publicize the list demonstrated "a relationship of trust that they built with me, which is why I chose to believe them... And I'm going to see this through" (Cassin & Prasad, 2017). Using the exposure of the women's experiences to spark dialogue, to expose silences, and to prevent further harm can be characterised as an act of affirmation.

While publicly naming alleged perpetrators may not alter the misogynistic mind frames of those who perpetrate, and of cultures that uphold such behaviour as "normal," it may very well quell their unfettered public expression. At the very least, publicly naming perpetrators opens up conversations about gendered experiences of (non) consent and violence, as evidenced by the responses to Sarkar's list. As one Indian feminist opined, "The discourse has shifted to whether it's ethical or not...I think that's a question we can tackle once we've all agreed that there is an egregious abuse of power in these institutions and that there's a reason the list exists in the first place." (Kappal, 2017).



The limits of policy thus create conditions where women are choosing agency in ways that work for them. Breaking silence while remaining anonymous provides an empowering, if incomplete, remedy. Sarkar's list counters the harm of violence, compounded by the harm of voicelessness. Thus, anonymous disclosure appears to be one strategy of many to hasten and enhance culture change. It recalls the root causes of oppression and their antecedents—both imposed silence, and the costs of naming oneself as marked by sexist injury. The privilege enacted through GBV is challenged through women coming together, to resist, and to raise a collective voice.

## **Conclusion**

LoSHA returned the focus to those who cause harm, rather than those harmed. In the face of both institutional and cultural indifference to singular accounts of victimisation and of survival, the momentum for change marshaled by Sarkar's list—and the media attention it generated—stand as a testament to the power of the collective. We have considered the question: What does such an act of feminist solidarity mean, and what work does it do in feminist activism against GBV?

We reject the false binary between due process and solidarity-building activist initiatives such as Sarkar's list, and recognise them as two elements of attempts to resist GBV which are both limited—one by the prevailing gendered and sexist nature of the institutional structures and cultures which deny women justice and the other by the way in which it precludes the possibility of individual justice for the victim or the alleged perpetrator. In the university context, it thus follows that our focus should not remain narrowly on reporting mechanisms and complaint policies and procedures. Rather, in addition to institutional redressal mechanisms and prevention education

initiatives, a crucial part of the jigsaw of responses to GBV in academia is feminist activism to recognise and shift prevailing sexist cultures.

While the norms that underpin the perpetration of GBV have not changed significantly over the time that feminist activism and scholarship has critiqued it, such activism indicates that women may have a greater sense of *entitlement* to safety and quality of life (Lewis, 2004), an expectation that was evident in account after account of survivors featured in *The Hunting Ground* (Dick & Ziering, 2015). Sarkar's list exists in a context where women's expectations may be changing but they still find the due process of university complaints procedures and criminal justice systems inadequate and find the informal networks that uphold powerful interests and institutional cultures resistant to change. While reporting GBV is fraught with sanction, doing so anonymously may enable a sense of empowerment by unmasking the alleged perpetrators of GBV to make them visible, in a context where institutions have proved themselves unable to protect women or deliver justice. We argue that such disclosures as contained in the LoSHA are not a substitute for clear procedures of accountability, complete with due process protections for both the aggrieved and accused. However, in the absence of assurance of survivors' safety and dignity within existing mechanisms for redress, and given the failure of these mechanisms to deliver justice, such lists constitute a reasonable—if less than optimal—response.

Moreover, publishing such lists reflects the benefits—and the potential shortcomings—of internet activism. Online activism can quickly bring attention to an issue from a diverse range of actors across continents, connecting and creating communities of activists around the globe and allowing them to highlight the commonalities in GBV across geographies, ethnicities, class and caste; LoSHA was published while Sarkar was in the US and generated conversations in and beyond

India. In addition, through the conversations generated online, cyber activism can make significant contributions to discursive politics, educating, raising awareness, developing new ways of thinking about contemporary issues. However, alone, it is not enough to undo centuries of social and cultural norms and structural practices which have allowed GBV to continue. For that, activists must develop strategic campaigns, initiatives and interventions designed to transform the material structures that underpin GBV—the national, local and institutional policies and practices, services for victims/survivors, interventions with perpetrators, and the poverty and inequality that exposes marginalised women to GBV and exacerbates its impacts.

A question for further consideration, beyond the scope of this article, is the nature of the costs to Sarkar. We are deeply conscious that we are writing about the incident, and in turn, about their choices—supportively, but nonetheless from a distance. What price has Sarkar paid for their willingness to be the mouthpiece for their contemporaries, and the public face of their traumas? Has that cost in any way deterred their determination? In a recent interview Sarkar shared that making the list “took a toll on my mental health, but I had a really strong support system” (Washington Post, 2017). Sarkar is, of course, one of thousands of feminists and whistle-blowers actively campaigning for an end to GBV in India, as elsewhere. Their comments reflect the extraordinary costs of breaking the silence and in their deep and principled commitment, also, of not.

Raya Sarkar’s list similarly enables the envisioning of new realities, including the seemingly impossible alternative of a world free of sexual harassment. Or at least one where the shame arising from such harassment is turned on the perpetrator, not the victim. It is an imperfect tool, a pragmatic strategy in a context where other remedies remain unavailable for the vast majority of

victims and survivors in academe. It was nonetheless an effective tool that generated a public discussion of and recognition of sexist cultures in academe, and of possible strategies to resist and end GBV. Focusing on this event allows us to explore questions of harm, cost, and reparation in the face of sexual violence that remain elusive, and further commit ourselves to imagining and enacting an end to the harm that makes such questions necessary.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The caste system is a hereditary social stratification system based on endogamy which divides Indian people hierarchically. Originally an aspect of Hinduism, caste is also a feature of other religions in India. Traditionally, the caste system determined many aspects of life and was rigidly applied, including by the British colonial powers. With India's independence, the constitution outlawed discrimination on the grounds of caste, but inequality and social stratification as a result, partly, of the caste system, continues to exist.

<sup>1</sup> In October 2017 *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* reported that Harvey Weinstein, leading US film producer, had been accused of sexual abuse by dozens of women in the film industry, over several decades. Following the accusations and the media furore which followed, Weinstein was dismissed from his company and from the American Academy of Motion Pictures. These events sparked the #MeToo movement, a hashtag used on social media in an attempt to reveal the widespread prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace.

3. Title IX is a U.S. government law, passed in 1972, that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex by any organization that receives federal funding. It has been used in the university context to hold institutions to account for GBV experienced by students.

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